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BOOKS AND CULTURE

With All His Might

Winston Churchill did save the West, John Lukacs shows.

Daniel J. Mahoney

July 25, 2008

Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat: The Dire Warning: Churchill's First Speech as Prime Minister, by John Lukacs (Basic Books, 147 pp., \$24.00)

The Hungarian-born historian and man of letters John Lukacs is among our most learned and stimulating guides to the twentieth century, despite his sometimes irritating political and historical judgments. These include thunderous anathemas against American conservatism—which he contemptuously identifies with demagogic populism—and an increasingly unreflective antianticommunism (the word is his own). In Lukacs, the learned and humane historian coexists with a polemicist whose stubborn opinions on occasion make one cringe. In a charitable mood, one might say that these oppositions constitute an essential part of his curmudgeonly charm. For better or worse, Lukacs must be confronted whole.

Fortunately, his numerous books and writings on Winston Churchill bring out the best in him. In an egalitarian age in which greatness itself is belittled, at a time when partisans on both the left (such as Nicholson Baker) and the right (Pat Buchanan) compete to denounce Churchill as a warmonger, Lukacs stands as the closest thing we have to an authoritative guide to things Churchillian. The skeptical reader might ask what Lukacs's newest Churchill book could possibly add to what he has already written in such illuminating works as *The Duel*, *Five Days in London: May 1940*, and *Churchill: Visionary, Statesman, and Historian*. It's a fair question, and in fact there is a strong element of what the French call "déjà lu" ("I've already read that") in this short book. Commissioned by Basic Books for its Basic Ideas series, it is ostensibly a commentary on

the significance of Churchill's "Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat" speech of May 13, 1940, but it covers a broader canvas, serving as a précis of Lukacsian wisdom about Churchill. Lukacs provides a streamlined, elegant account of Churchill's speeches and statesmanship during the crucial summer of 1940, when Britain stood on the brink of disaster.

Churchill delivered the speech before a parliament still dominated by supporters of Neville Chamberlain and by Conservative mandarins suspicious of Churchill's alleged bellicosity, "unreliability," "unscrupulousness," and sundry other character defects. As Lukacs makes clear, Churchill's enemies at that time were primarily members of his own party; only a year or two earlier, they had been wholehearted defenders of a policy of appeasing Nazi Germany. After the deceptive inactivity of the "phony war"—in which the Western democracies stood back waiting to be attacked—and the devastating British defeat in Norway, a critical mass of the Conservative party came to realize that Neville Chamberlain did not have the personal qualities necessary for wartime leadership. But many still distrusted Churchill, including some eminent lights who in time would become unabashed Churchillians.

Lukacs dedicates surprisingly little space to an analysis of the May 13 speech. Delivered three days after King George VI asked Churchill to form a government, the speech, one of Churchill's shortest, was neither recorded nor broadcast to the nation at large. It became famous only after the fact. The BBC laconically summed it up in its regular news that evening by citing its key sentence: "I would say to the House as I said to those who have joined the government: I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat." In the speech itself, those words were followed by Churchill's declaration of his government's "policy" to "wage war, by sea, land, and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us."

For Lukacs, Churchill's maiden speech as prime minister is striking for the moral realism that informed his judgment of the international situation and his message to the British people. He did not in any way obscure what Lukacs calls the "prospect of plight and suffering" that lay ahead. Lukacs convincingly argues that Churchill was a liberty-loving aristocrat who appreciated the British people's capacity to absorb bad news and to respond accordingly. He could appeal to the gritty determination of a free people to stand up against a "monstrous tyranny" and respond, when necessary, to a call to sacrifice on behalf of a way of life worth defending. As Lukacs points out, judging events by their eventual consequences is easy; it is now a commonplace to say that "the British pulled through," that "England *held*." But there was nothing inevitable about the

survival of either Britain or of “Western civilization.” A student of Tocqueville, Lukacs resists the illusion of retrospective fatalism, of historical determinism, to which so many historians succumb in a democratic age and about which the French thinker warned so powerfully. Lukacs is wonderfully attentive to the human element, to the difference that a single man made in shaping history.

Lukacs reminds us how bleak British prospects were until the war began to turn in the Allies’ favor after November 1942 (that moment, long after America entered the war, that Churchill described as “the end of the beginning”). Churchill was aware of the real and terrible possibility of a Nazi victory before almost anyone else. How was he so lucid about men and events? For one thing, he never underestimated the strength, determination, and paradoxical “modernity” of the monstrous National Socialist dictatorship. The Left tended to see in National Socialism a merely atavistic barbarism, a temporary detour from inevitable progress, or a manifestation of the “contradictions” of so-called “late capitalism.” These “progressivist,” quasi-Marxist categories illuminated nothing. In contrast, Churchill appreciated the genuinely revolutionary character of the Nazi regime, which meant that in opposing it the democracies were defending the broad “continuity” of Western civilization. As Lukacs brilliantly demonstrates, Churchill saw clearly because of, and not despite, his “conservatism.”

Churchill’s rhetoric could be at once sobering and inspiring because he knew precisely what was at stake in the struggle with Hitlerism. Just a month after his first speech as prime minister, on June 18, 1940, he delivered his “Finest Hour” speech, in which he declared that if Germany achieved hegemony over Europe, the whole world would “sink into the abyss of a new dark age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science.” Lukacs’s penetrating analysis of the “Finest Hour” speech is one of the book’s highlights. He rightly argues that the West confronted something much more dramatic than “a dreadful historical episode of a tyranny, of a modern mass-supported dictatorship replacing liberalism, parliaments, democracy.” Rather, what was at stake was what Churchill called “civilization”—liberal *and* Christian civilization—“all that we have known and cared for.”

Churchill put his hortatory rhetoric at the service of educating the public and steeling British resolve. When he became prime minister, public opinion was far from understanding or accepting the dire straits that confronted Britain and the British cause. In this sense, the “Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat” speech provided the crucial empirical and moral underpinnings for Churchillian statesmanship during the Battle of Britain, which the British public was only belatedly prepared to fight. Lukacs draws upon

fascinating public opinion surveys to show how Britons gradually began to catch up with Churchillian realism and determination during the five-week period between his maiden parliamentary address and the “Finest Hour” speech. The near-debacle at Dunkirk—where 330,000 British and French troops were almost lost before being successfully evacuated, seemingly against all odds—and the ultimate fall of France after a remarkably short battle sobered the British populace and put an end to the era of “wishful thinking.” Britain was beginning to see with something resembling Churchillian clarity.

Lukacs also succinctly draws on *Five Days in London*, his book-length account of how Churchill outmaneuvered his foreign secretary, the Earl of Halifax, in the five-man war cabinet to put an end to any doubt about British determination to fight to the bitter end. In his luminous Dunkirk speech of June 4, 1940, Churchill proclaimed his much-vaunted “never surrender” policy. According to Hitler’s view of the world, the British were a higher, Aryan “race”; the German dictator even occasionally expressed a willingness to tolerate the survival of a quasi-independent British state and empire. To inquire about German terms for a “negotiated settlement,” as Halifax wanted, was in Churchill’s view to start voluntarily down the road to self-enslavement. Halifax was no traitor or fascist sympathizer, and he conducted himself honorably throughout the war. But Churchill was nearly alone in fully appreciating that the Nazi regime was a profoundly anti-European ideological enterprise committed to the extirpation of Western civilization.

Lukacs is on shakier ground when he praises Churchill for prescience about Russia’s imperial intentions at the end of the war. In his view, Russia is inherently imperialist and tyrannical—the land of the absolutists Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great—and Lenin’s and Stalin’s totalitarian dictatorship was a manifestation of “eternal Russia” rather than of Soviet ideology. Further, he ascribes this highly problematic view to Churchill. In contrast, in his recently published *Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War*, Pat Buchanan lambastes Churchill for succumbing, if only for a time, to the view that the Soviet Union had de-ideologized and was in the process of becoming “Russia” once again. In Buchanan’s revisionist account, Churchill precipitated the “unnecessary” Second World War by not recognizing that the USSR was a greater threat than Germany. Buchanan is closer to the truth than Lukacs about the nature of the Soviet regime and Churchill’s (thankfully temporary) illusions about it—though he is wrong, terribly wrong, in blaming the war on Churchill.

Lukacs understands that Churchill allowed civilization to survive for another 50 years, and perhaps much more. As he puts it in the conclusion of *Five Days in London*,

Churchill “attempted to withstand and sweep back the wave” of a monstrous revolutionary nihilism that many at the time confused with “a wave of the future.” For his noble deeds and speech, the great English statesman surely deserves our gratitude and admiration. And it is to John Lukacs’s credit that he allows us to appreciate this against the obfuscations of both the revisionist Left and Right.

*Daniel J. Mahoney, the chairman of the political science department at Assumption College, has written extensively on democratic statesmanship. Most recently, he has edited (with Edward E. Ericson, Jr.) **The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings, 1947–2005.***

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